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HEADLINE: Freshmen Revitalize Legislature;
Reform-Minded Newcomers Making Their Voices Heard

BYLINE: Robert Barnes, Washington Post Staff Writer

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When veteran legislators heard that freshman Del. Jean W. Roesser (R-Montgomery) was co-sponsoring a bill that would delete centuries-old jury instructions in rape cases, they were sympathetic.

"It will be a good experience for you," one legislator told her.

Everyone thought the experience would be one in humility. Instead, it became the thrill of victory.

For more years than legislative veterans could remember, bills prohibiting judges from using the so-called Lord Hale instructions, which tell a jury to closely examine the testimony of rape victims because the charge is easy to make and difficult to disprove, had been summarily disposed of by the House Judiciary Committee.

This year, though, was different. The bill passed easily and has sailed through the House.

There were a number of factors at work, but Del. Pauline Menes (D-Prince George's), who has sponsored the legislation for years, said the most important was a new chairman and an infusion of freshmen on the committee.

"They [the freshmen] were not married to continue something simply because of historical significance," Menes said. "They see things from a different point of view."

And this year's edition of the General Assembly has a large freshman class, especially in the House. There are 42 new faces in the 141-member House, many of them from Montgomery and Prince George's counties. There are eight newcomers in the 47-member Senate, but all except Sen. Michael Mitchell (D-Baltimore) previously served in the House.

The sheer number of freshmen has made them an easily identified group in the House, and leaders make sure that they are not overlooked. Gov. William Donald Schaefer had all of the first-timers over for breakfast at the mansion

early in the session, and the group has met with House Speaker R. Clayton Mitchell (D-Kent). Last week, they were briefed on the budget by House Appropriations Committee Chairman Charles J. Ryan (D-Prince George's).

Del. Ann Marie Doory (D-Baltimore) helped organize some of the sessions, but said it was not an effort to transform the freshmen into a political force. The idea was more that "we're all here in a new experience -- let's share it," Doory said.

Most freshmen agree that while they share some traits -- for the most part, they feel more serious and a little more independent than their predecessors -- they are too different to become a caucus. "Each of us represents a different group of constituents and interests," said Del. Juanita Miller (D-Prince George's).

And each is developing his own style. Del. Peter Franchot (D-Montgomery) landed a seat on the important appropriations committee and has discovered what can be accomplished by inserting directives for state government in the budget bill.

Del. Paul Pinsky (D-Prince George's) has introduced some sweeping and controversial bills that even he admits don't have much of a chance. But portions of his bill requiring disclosure for insurance companies are being incorporated into a larger bill that is likely to be passed.

Pinsky said his constituents want him to be involved with consumer concerns and controversial issues. "My constituents know I didn't come down here to fix curbs," Pinsky said.

Other new members, Dels. Gilbert Genn (D-Montgomery) and James C. Rosapepe (D-Prince George's), are often mentioned by their colleagues for taking the time-honored approach of working hard on their committees.

Many freshmen believe their colleagues are serious about their work. Del. Brian Frosh, an aptly named Montgomery County Democrat, was a state government lobbyist in the early 1970s, and he sees a great change in the General Assembly.

"The legislature now is much more serious," Frosh said. "Fifteen years ago, it was more like a fraternity party."

The freshmen also are less likely to be beholden to the leadership. Many ran independent of the slates put together by incumbents and party regulars.

"I chose to do it that way because I thought I could win that way," said Del. Anne MacKinnon (D-Prince George's). "I wasn't bucking the system."

But MacKinnon said that being elected independent of the political structure "you do come down here with a little different feeling. My biggest special interest is my family; I owe my election to them."

One concern that most of the freshmen seem to share is that most deals on bills are made out of earshot, without a free exchange of ideas and with a minimum of public debate.

"The frustration we all have is that you get isolated," said Pinsky. "There is less sharing of ideas than you want."

While at least one critic has worried that the influx of young lawyers and professionals is resulting in a "yuppification" of the legislature, the freshman class contains a number of blacks and women. The number of black legislators has risen from 24 to 27, women from 36 to 41.

That, at least, is a change from the past, said Doory. "Twenty years ago, everybody was pretty much of the same mold," she said: "white male lawyers."